

**Call number: 02-00-133-16 PT. 4**

**Albert Yrjana talks with Karen and Roger McPherson about fishing**

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**Notes: Original in 7-inch tape, master copy on CD. Produced by Roger McPherson. THESE TAPES WERE PRODUCED AS A PART OF AN EXPERIMENTAL PROGRAM NOW DEFUNCT AND WERE BROADCAST OVER THE RADIO FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES.**

A man's voice [Albert Yrjana, as indicated by the tape case] says that there used to be lots of fishermen who fished for dogs, but they are now on welfare and food stamps and have stopped fishing. They are going to lose the art of fishing among the Indians. They are going to be on food stamps.

Roger says that they are interested in the people who are actually fishing, and how they are fishing in the summer. Albert says it's no different from what it has always been: First the king salmon run up the river and then they are followed by dog salmon and silver salmon. One can fish year round. Albert has fished through the ice and that there's no shortage of fish. There are all kinds of fish but people go hungry for fish because they won't catch it.

30 years ago in Ruby, there were a number of fishermen and plenty of fish. One couldn't buy fish. Albert can't remember how many fish camps there were between "here" and Galena 30 years ago, but one could still count the sites. Above Ruby, there was a number of fish camps, but below Tanana, there was a space between Kokrine and Tanana where there weren't any fishermen but at Kokrine there was fishing going on. Albert doesn't think there's one fish wheel beyond [he interrupts his thought]. Johnny Hooney [sp?] is below Kokrine, but there is not a single fish wheel above that and from there to Tanana.

3:05 Roger asks if there were many fish wheels in the area 30 years ago. Albert tells that 30 years ago in Ruby, there was Scotty Clarke, Demoski's and Louie Gilbeck who were below Ruby. Above Ruby, there was the Dego Kid [sp?] whose

name was Alex Brown, and then there were Andy Hague and Red Allen. 14 miles above [Ruby] there was Roughhouse Bill whose name was Bill Roberts. There was almost a fishing village and the slough was full of people. There were Bill Dean, and Paul Cleavers. That's how many there were "them days" and Albert admits that he probably missed a few. [A woman's voice says something.] There were Frank Alberts, Moses Williams and some old lady who were fishing right below a big eddy. Then there were Old Man Titus, his boys, and Billy McCarthy.

Roger asks if they were all using fish wheels or if they had nets. Albert says that they were using fish wheels and nets on the side. The first net the speaker used was a Sears Roebuck and it was a short one. They were cheap to buy. He placed his nets in the eddies along the shore and in wintertime they are put under the ice.

6:02 There used to be an old lady who was fishing "here" in wintertime, and that was the only regular source [of fish?] that one could get. The lady froze to death when she was going home. The interviewee says she maybe celebrated a bit too much and froze several miles away from Ruby. She used to be the town fisherman. Her name was Old Jenny. The speaker bought fish from her too. [A woman's voice says something unclear.] The man says that times have changed on the Yukon "something fierce."

Roger asks him to tell about some of the big changes in fishing. Albert tells that now they have snow machines and very few people have dogs to which they would have to fish anymore. Only fools like himself fish now. He has nets and the fish wheel and he just fishes enough for the dogs and some for sale. The lady says that commercial fishermen can't have nets and fish wheels going on at the same time because that's the law, but they do. Albert says that they get around that and that there's very little fish compared to what there used to be. When the speaker first came to Ruby area, Alex Brown sold 10 tons of dog fish. That's a huge pile. Now the total output of all the fish camps wouldn't amount to 10 tons.

8:15 Roger asks how many camps there are around Ruby. Albert tells that Billy Catton [sp?] has a wheel, Albert himself has one, and Frankie Gurtler had a wheel but he pulled it up already. He doesn't stay in Ruby but just comes and fishes for king salmon in summertime. He didn't want to wait for the silvers, so he left a few days ago. A woman's voice mentions Charlie Ross and the man tells that he has a

fish wheel. The lady continues that Zeta Cleaver has a net and Johnny Hooney has a fish wheel on a big eddy 14 miles out of Ruby.

Roger asks Albert to tell about this year's run. He tells that king salmon run has increased during his 5 years of owning the fish camp. It was down to almost nothing just 3-4 years ago but this spring they had the heaviest run that they have seen. It doesn't compare with what it was 30 years ago. 30 years ago they had so much king salmon that it was fed to the dogs. It's a delicacy, but in Ruby they caught too much and it was cut into dog food. The lady says it's too rich for dog fish. Albert says he bought some, but found out that it's too rich for dogs. They had to feed tallow with the fish to the dogs. It makes a mess and wears out the dogs if they are "too loose" on the trail.

10:54 Roger asks Albert to tell more about the run "this year" and asks how many fish he caught during those days. He tells that Alec Brown had a camp that Albert bought from his widow. He bought the camp from Louie Pilbeck. When he first came there, they told him that they just ran the wheel for few hours and it would be overflowing. He's seen it himself.

It was in a little town with bunch of people working there, and his wife, Altona was a fish cutting machine. Albert says that she in an old lady, but she worked until a couple of years ago. She could cut 80 fish an hour in her old age, and they say that during 4<sup>th</sup> of July fish cutting contest she cut 112 fish in an hour.

Albert has seen her work and tried to copy it, but the best he can do is 50 or 60 fish per hour. She's a super expert. Roger asks if she cut the fish near the fish wheel or if it was transported somewhere. The speaker tells that they caught the fish and then hauled it to the camp with a boat for cutting it. One has to have racks and a fish cutting table and everything set up for cutting. The lady says that they run the boat right up to the fish cutting place and the fish were put to the table. Albert says that that woman's [Altona's] effectiveness was something to see.

13:38 Karen asks Albert to describe how the fish was cut. He tells it's head is cut off at first. One doesn't cut straight down from the back of the head but at an angle so that one leaves as little flesh on the head as possible. If one cuts straight, one loses 1/2 inch of fish. Then the fish is split and the knife is stuck close to the tail, above the back bone and the fish is split in half in one swipe. An amateur will flip

the fish over and cut through the back bone. One doesn't cut it but tap or hit it. Then one gives the tail a little bit of a twist so that the back bone breaks and one can cut under it. They can leave the back bone or throw it into the gut pile. It's good nutrition for dogs and if one leaves it on, it's less wasteful. Then one will score one side by cutting the flesh to the skin and each piece will be about an inch or less than an inch. It takes 12-13 cuts on each side per one fish. One cuts true to the skin but not into the skin because then the fish would be in pieces. The fish will cure easily and dry in strips. That's the secret of fish cutting. It can't be explained but one has to see it.

Altona doesn't have to flip the fish for cutting the scores but can cut both ways with her knife. Most of the fishermen have to turn the fish over, flat side against the table, in order to score it. Her method in scoring is an all-in-one operation. She'll out cut any fisherman.

17:48 Roger asks what happens to the sides of the fish once they have been scored. Albert explains that they are placed over a pole with the skin side out so that if it rains, the rain won't hurt it. It'll just wet the outside and the inside will keep drying. , The fish is turned after a day or so, so that the flesh is out and it's let to dry another day or two. If it's a good drying weather, one can leave the fish for up to a week. Then one puts it into the smoke house for curing.

Curing takes from about 3 weeks to a month before the fish is dry enough to bale. Then one bales the fish by putting the heads one way and the tails another. One needs to alternate the pile. Then the fish are pressed in order to make the pile smaller and then it's tied with two wires. It's almost like baling hay. Most people now fish for themselves and it's easier just to put the fish over a wire and when one gets about 50 pounds, one can just tie the ends together if one has plenty of room. Those days it had to be baled because it was transported out. Trappers took fish with them and it had to be baled so it would take less space.

20:23 Roger asks what kinds of people used to buy the bales of fish. Albert tells that prospectors and trappers bought them for their dog teams. Even the U.S. Mail was hauled with dog teams those days. He's seen it himself.

Roger inquires when the mail service stopped buying bales of fish. Albert tells that mail from Ruby to Cripple Landing was driven by Scotty Clarke. He went

sometimes with Scotty Clark. They were cutting wood “out there” for Stramburg [sp?] and Sons and they always went to greet the mail when it came to Cripple Landing. He saw the mail being hauled there from around 1938 to 1941 or 1942 which is when the airplanes took over. The service didn't improve, but went haywire. “Them days” one could rely on the dog team being there, but with the airplanes there could be delays and a dog team would have been faster. It's a fact. The planes don't fly in bad weather, but the dog teams had to go out unless it was -50 or -60 below.

22:34 Roger says that he'd like to hear something about cooking salmon. The woman says that they can it. They can 3-day strips. One make the strips and cures them less than 3 days, 2-2.5 days. Then they are smoked a little. When one makes strips they are dipped in salt water and glazed, after which they are put into the smoke house. They burn big cottonwood logs that have no resin in them. Cottonwood is what gives them good flavor. After 3 days, one cans the fish in no. 2 -size cans. They are good to eat.

Roger asks if people in Ruby have canned salmon strips for a long time. The lady tells that they do only a little bit of canning. One can do any kind of kippering to the fish and then can them. Now the fish can also be put into plastic bags and frozen. They are cured partially or fully, put into a plastic bag, and sealed electrically. Then they are frozen and the bag can be put right into water to cook it. That's a new thing for those who have a freezer. Many people don't have freezers because of the lack of electricity. They are supposed to get electric lights.

24:45 Roger asks if fish oil or fish eggs has been used for anything. The lady tells that they sell fish eggs to a man who comes from Nenana and goes up to Fort Yukon to buy fish eggs. Albert tells that they never throw anything away at their fish camp.

He's a trapper in wintertime and one would be a fool to throw the heads and guts away. He puts heads and guts in a barrel and lets them stink all summer. They just tie a plastic over the barrels to keep flies out and then they make them into one giant stink. Then he hauls it out on the trap-line and uses it for a lure for animals.

Last year he got 130 martens. His wife broke her leg in November so he had to quit trapping. He started 3 days after the season opened and then she broke her leg so

he didn't trap much. He uses the heads and guts for bates. The lady says the rest are thrown into the Yukon. Albert continues by saying that it's a smelly business but the animals don't mind it a bit but in fact they like it. It's the best thing to attract them. He tells that he caught as many as 35 martens in setting the traps one day and collecting them the next day. They also got 17.5 "straight through the bunch" [not clear what this means].

27:37 Roger asks if fish heads were used in the past for bates and Albert tells that they were, somewhat, but not the way he has done it – having barrels of that stuff. It's a good lure.

Karen asks from whom he learned fishing from. He tells that his ancestors have fished the rivers of Russia [?] since longer than the Indians in Alaska. They've been there before the Russians. When they came to the United States, they had to fish. Albert too, he had to start fishing himself.

Roger asks if he's applying knowledge that he learned in Finland, but Albert explains that he was born in upper Michigan. There were about 300 Finnish settlers and a one Scotchman. He doesn't know how he got mixed in. Albert himself came to Ruby in fall of 1939.

People were really fishing back then. Everybody had a dog team and that was the only way to get around. There were prospectors at the creeks. The lady says that all of the people in the Kokrines had fish wheels. They would fish in the summer and go trapping in wintertime. There were no food stamps then, or aid.

29:57 That time they had to work for a living but now with all the welfare and food stamps, the Indian has gone [unclear]. Earlier, the Indians were different. They were true Indians and not so mixed. It was a different life for everybody. Now, with all the welfare, they have made it into a business to be poor.

Roger asks if the man ever saw any times of famine in the area. He says he didn't. They would hunt, fish and trap. He thinks there's more famine now and actual poor nutrition. When the food stamps go out, most of the money goes towards booze. He says there's a little store there and that he's seen that the first consideration is booze and food is next, but secondary.

31:48 Roger asks what kinds of people still have fish wheels and are still fishing. Albert tells that there is Frankie Girdler who is a half-breed Indian and White. Albert himself considers himself a white man since he is a Finn. Johnny Holmy [sp?] is a half [Native] too, and Charlie Ross is the same way. Billie Captain is either an Indian or a half-breed.

Roger asks why people fish if they don't have to. Albert tells that they fish because everybody likes fish. Not many do fishing though, since there are food stamps, pork chops and chicken instead. They consider fish a sort of a low-grade eat. If they eat too much fish, "they are not up there" [up in the social hierarchy].

Roger asks about the different ways the fish was used in the past. Albert says that strips are made of king salmon and that that's for human consumption. Dog fish can be eaten too, but that's not so good and it's mostly fed to the dogs. Silvers are used for human food. They come later in the fall and they are high quality food. One can make strips out of them, and what they call eating fish. They are scored and dried for human use. That's a food trappers can have. One can eat it in the coldest weather and on the trail. One can go where one needs to, and come back again [eating dried fish].

34:40 Roger asks when the fishing season begins and when it ends. The king salmon season starts around June 20<sup>th</sup> and by 4<sup>th</sup> of July they are running strong. Then they taper off, after which comes dog fish and silvers. Then, late in the fall, one can catch chinooks that are red fish, but those aren't used too much because they have a taste that people don't like. They make an excellent dog fish, though.

Roger asks when the fish is smoked and brought to camps. Albert tells that towards fall, people move the fish with the camps for next season [move the fish when they pack up?].

Roger says that he has the July schedule of fish that was caught by Albert Yrjana, and that during July, he caught 3 white fish. Albert explains that that's the first fish that they caught when they put the fish wheel into the river. Then Roger says that he notices that they shut down on 7<sup>th</sup> of July, and asks what happened then. Albert says they couldn't handle it because of high water and lots of drift. They had to pull the wheel out so it wouldn't break. Roger asks if they shut down the wheel

again from 17<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup>. Albert says they did and that on those days that are unmarked, the wheel hasn't been running.

Roger says that he can see that the king salmon drop-offs are around 13<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> of the month, and that Albert caught 112 dog salmon on 16<sup>th</sup>. Albert explains that that's when the dog salmon started running. After 2-3 weeks of it [king salmon fishing], it'll taper off and the dog salmon will show up. After a while there's only a scattering of kings. Roger says that he sees that Albert catches consistently around 20 white fish. Albert explains that they are in the Yukon River year round. They migrate either out of the rivers or into the rivers in the fall. There are some 3 runs of dog fish [Albert means white fish] in the Yukon River and the fall run is something one has to see. Their fish wheel can hold some 400-450 fish and that'll be full of dog fish, [Albert corrects himself by saying white fish]. There's lots of that fish in the Yukon.

38:25 Roger tells that he's been told that there's a difference in the quality of the fish between the Tanana and the Yukon River. Albert says that the longer they are in fresh water, the poorer they get. They have longer ways to travel and that makes a difference. Albert says there's also a difference between the kind of fish they catch in Ruby and the ones that are caught near the mouth of the river.

When the king salmon first enter the river, they are full of fat and oil. When they get to Ruby, they are much thinner and the further they go, the poorer they get. In Ruby they are still good.

[End of the recording.]